

NOTES on How we Use our Wealth

“People who hoard wealth are not only demonstrating utterly false priorities; they are also depriving others of their very life.” (Moo, 214)

Jeremiah 22:13 “Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor.

Malachi 3:5 So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.

James 5:3 “last days”

“Last days” – James knows they are in the last days – Jesus ushered in the last days – it is certainly coming – there is no excuse for not knowing. But instead the “rich” continue to gain and hoard as if nothing had changed – like partying on the Titanic after it had struck the iceberg.

“Here is where it becomes essential to understand the eschatological world-view of the NT. We live in the last days and have done so since Pentecost (cf. Ac 2:17). Christ could return at any point. Where is our treasure? Are we laying it up on earth so that we might live in comfort, planning for a long life here (see cf. Lk 12:13-21), or do we focus more on amassing treasure in heaven with God, and merely grateful for the blessings he has given us here and now? The condemnation is not for owning wealth *per se*, but for hoarding rather than using it for kingdom purposes. As Johnson observes, “the last days’ . . . are not the anticipated retirement years of the rich, but the time of God’s judgment.” (Blomberg, 288)

James 5:5 You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

“The NAB translates, “you lived in wanton luxury;” the NLT, “satisfying your every whim;” and Moffatt, “you have reveled on earth and plunged into dissipation.” Weymouth speaks of “profligate lives;” Goodspeed, of living

“luxuriously and voluptuously;” and Rotherham, of having “luxuriated upon the land and run riot.” (Blomberg, 290)

“Luxury” extravagant comfort – the softness of luxury. (Motyer, 167)
A life without self-denial, not necessarily corrupt in every way, but certainly offering no resistance to sin where there is promise of comfort and enjoyment.” (Motyer, 167)

James 5:6 You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you.

“It is easy to find examples today of the non-Christian rich who exploit the poor, and who sometimes go extra hard on believers. Many individual Christians have poignant stories to tell about just such behavior by their employers. But the problem goes far beyond the individual level. Governments around the world almost by definition claim to make decisions based on “national interest,” which usually translates into a disproportionate interest in the richest classes of that nation. Multinational corporations may look for the cheapest overseas labor so they can make the greatest profit, whether or not they pay a fair and decent wage and irrespective of the impact on the job market in the communities in which their headquarters or major Western plants are based. In many parts of the Two-Thirds world, they (or wealthy indigenous private owners, the local equivalent of the Mafia, or the government itself) own vast tracts of land that are cultivated by “guest workers” for substandard wages. Migrant workers in the U.S. often face similar injustices, made all the more complicated by the fact that some—but only some—of them are also illegal aliens. Even among full-fledged American citizens, the buying power of workers (i.e., wages evaluated based on cost of living in any given location) varies greatly from one part of the country to the next, with inequities based on race, country of origin, gender and marital status still alarmingly sizable. Wall’s words are worth pondering: “If James’s brand of piety is taken seriously and at face value. . . a substantial portion of the North American church would become quite uncomfortable with the ease by which it has accommodated the upward economic mobility of liberal democracy while trying to follow after its downwardly mobile Lord.”

But there are even more uncomfortable applications that should be made. How many upper- or middle-class Western Christians have so

many extra, largely unused clothes, so that, were it not for mothballs or their equivalent, they *would* have become moth-eaten? How many have other needless possessions, even investments, that are not being used for much of anything, and certainly not for the Lord's work, that would be better off given to the needy? How many, if they were to be ruthlessly honest, live a lifestyle perilously close to that of v. 5—of luxury and self-indulgence? Then there is the enormous waste of food left uneaten and thrown away in restaurants, of the quantities of garbage thrown out that could be recycled, of planned obsolescence of products so that entirely new ones must be bought rather than old ones repaired (or the prohibitive cost of repairs making it cheaper just to buy a new item). A generation ago it was almost unheard of to raze an entire building just to put another one on the same site, or to level a whole shopping center to replace it with a new one, or to tear down an entire athletic stadium just to build a larger, fancier one, but today all of these are common occurrences. How many churches think that the only realistic option when they outgrow one facility is to build a bigger, more up-scale one, with thousands and even millions of dollars diverted from truly helping the world's destitute, physically and spiritually? One shudders to think of the potential judgment of God being stored up by so many examples of profligate waste.

Of course, one dare not minimize the differences between a largely capitalist world today and the ancient Mediterranean economy of "limited good" (the belief that there was a fixed amount of wealth in the world such that, if one person had more, someone else necessarily had less). Many investments today are highly beneficial when their earnings continue to increase and are regularly used for God's kingdom work at home and abroad. A little bit of research can enable investors to determine companies that make reasonable efforts not to defraud workers, exploit the poor, or rape the environment. Similar research can enable consumers to make godlier, wiser choices when deciding which of several brands of some product to purchase. In 5:1-6 James hardly condemns savings or investing but rather *hoarding*. But he comes down hard on that selfishness and then even harder on lavish expenditures for self-indulgence." Blomberg, 303-6)

On "Compassion:"

An excellent short book: McNeil, Morrison, Nouwen, *Compassion*, 1982

Luke 6:36 “Be merciful (compassionate), just as your Father is merciful (compassionate).”

Compassion is from the Latin *pati* and *cum* which mean to suffer with. Compassion is more than tenderheartedness.

We are often temporarily impressed with some sad story and feel a sadness.

But compassion is to truly suffer with someone and that is contrary to our natural selves.

Suffering with someone means “we share in the other’s vulnerability, enter with him or her into the experience of weakness and powerlessness, become part of uncertainty, and give up control and self-determination.” (*Compassion*, 14)

God is compassionate – he came to be with us.

Competition, not compassion is our main motivation in life.

We define ourselves by our differences from others. We are more or less intelligent, good looking, creative, wealthy, strong, etc.

What we have achieved are the trophies that distinguish us.

We imagine we can “forge our own identities; that we are the collective impressions of our surroundings; that we are the trophies and distinctions we have won.” (*Compassion*, 20)

Jesus gives us a new identity that enables us to say, “I am not the esteem I can collect through competition, but the love I have freely received from God.” (*Compassion*, 21)

Then we are free to enter into the lives of others – to have real compassion.

Our lives are lived upwardly – we pull ourselves up, we climb the ladder, more and more, better and better.

Jesus stooped and he calls us to stoop

“Here we see what compassion means. It is **not** bending toward the underprivileged from a privileged position; it is not a reaching out from on high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary,

compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there. (Compassion 26)

“Compassion is not a snob gone slumming. Anybody can salve his conscience by an occasional foray into knitting for an (old folks home). Did you ever take a real trip down inside the broken heart of a friend? To feel the sob of the soul – the raw, red crucible of emotional agony? To have this become almost as much yours as that of your soul-crushed neighbor? Then, to sit down with him – and silently weep? This is the beginning of compassion.” (Jess Moody *Quote-Unquote*, p66)

Compassion is not just what we do but who we are in Christ.

When Jesus came he said the kingdom of God has come. The kingdom that is **to be** when Jesus returns **has already** invaded the present. Through God’s people we now see in part what will be true in full when Jesus returns.

“The future has already begun and is revealed each time strangers are welcomed, the naked are clothed, the sick and prisoners are visited, and oppression is overcome. Through these grateful actions the first glimpses of a new heaven and a new earth can be seen.” (McNeil, Morrison, Nouwen, *Compassion*, 134)

Jesus claimed to be God, the bearer of good news about the kingdom of God. What was the first indication of his credibility? His actions! When asked if he was the one to come, Jesus pointed to his actions, “the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear...” His actions were the source of his credibility. (McNeil, et al, 119)

In James we have seen that the true test of discipleship, of belonging to God, is in our actions.

Luke 6:36 “Be merciful (compassionate), just as your Father is merciful (compassionate).”